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Journalism and the Problem of Progress

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Abstract.

The book submitted in support of my application for a PhD by published work — *Everything Explained That Is Explainable*¹ — is a definitive study of the creation of the 29-volume Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1910-11), a reference work that gave shape and authority to a publishing model instrumental in developing new, interesting, occasionally profitable ways of designing, manufacturing, distributing and marketing books.

The Eleventh's most significant innovation: It was edited not by an esteemed academic, like Thomas Spencer Baynes, who was the principal editor of the Ninth edition (1875-1889), but by a *journalist*. For the Eleventh was not just a “collection of detached monographs”, to use the description of the Ninth by the *Britannica*'s new editor, Hugh Chisholm. The Eleventh was a “book”, one “planned on uniform lines as a single organism”. The book was about Progress. It was very long and very successful. Its story contains lessons useful in examining the topic of this essay.

First, it was a project of journalism published in an era of dramatic transition. Where previous reference works were, as Chisholm remarked, simply serial compilations of entries arranged alphabetically, the Eleventh was a complex multifaceted examination of the topic that fascinated its editor, the Oxford-educated former editor of *The St James's Gazette*, and his employer, an energetic American huckster named Horace Everett Hooper.

All encyclopedias before the Eleventh had been compiled by scholars, each of whom had assiduously avoided a narrow focus or even a discernable point of view (with the possible exception of the first encyclopedia of the modern age, that created by Denis Diderot in 1751, which had a controversial focus on revolution and other similar expressions of Enlightenment understanding). But the Eleventh was radically different. Its focus on an “ideology of transition” mirrored a contemporary set of assumptions so pervasive that even though Progress was indeed the story it told in its 29 volumes, and 44 million words, not a single entry was devoted to

¹ Denis Boyles, *Everything Explained That Is Explainable: On the Creation of the Encyclopædia Britannica, 1910-1911*, (New York: Knopf, 2016). 442pp. The book uses an unusual method of footnoting, imposed by the publisher, in which citations are presented in narrative fashion in the book's end matter.

“Progress” *per se*, just as none was given over to “Truth” or to “Beauty”. Some things defied simple explanation; besides, there was widespread belief in an unexamined virtue of Progress. Nobody was sure what it meant, but Chisholm meant to explain it by making sure every possible entry made reference, however indirect, to Progress.

In an age of revolutionary scientific and philosophical assertions, an appetite for Progress and self-improvement that rivals our own gave rise to social and educational institutions that supported individual effort and received widespread cultural and commercial reinforcement. The Eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* was an important element in constructing a worldview that reflected the optimistic assumptions of the age. And that produced its own problems, as this paper explains.

1. Introduction.

From the beginning, the *Britannica*’s Eleventh edition (1910-11) was more than just another of the many straightforward, improving reference works then in vogue. It was above all an editorial *project*, its execution so well-managed that, more than a century after its publication, it is still providing Wikipedia and other, similar online reference sites with a necessary core of fundamental information. The Victorian Ninth edition may have nearly bankrupted its publishers (Hooper’s Tenth edition of 1902-03, the Ninth plus some supplemental volumes edited by Chisholm, created to support the publication of the Eleventh, was a better financial model because, as promoted by *The Times*, it was sold as a “set” over a short period of time, instead of as single volumes published over the span of 15 years required by the Ninth), but the extraordinary entrepreneurial energy required to save the *Britannica* also had the unexpected benefit of not only reviving its fortunes but also rescuing its flailing partner, *The Times* newspaper. In the process, the Eleventh introduced significant and long-lasting innovations not only to book publishing and production but also to the way newspapers handled advertisements, editorial and marketing.

That surprising double-success was down to the Eleventh’s ability to not only convey reliable information during a period of turbulence, rapidly rising literacy, and social and political disruption, but also to give commercial life to all that new information by framing a single, coherent *Weltanschauung* reflecting where we were all heading — and why. This was important,

since in 1910, as now, one of the principal factors contributing to a sense of intellectual uncertainty and social and political agitation was the rise of new technologies and a further avalanche of new information — and hence new ideas and perspectives — about “The Sum of Human Knowledge”, as the *Britannica* put it. In the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, that “Sum” included not just technology and science, but ways of thinking that were considerably divergent from past practices, products and philosophies. The very idea of “progress” was still fluid as the century closed. All anyone really knew about progress was that there was a lot of it about, it was unstoppable and it was changing everything.

Unsurprisingly, anxiety is the inevitable consequence of widespread change. It shapes political perspectives and consumer needs in ways that have obvious applicability to journalism, as well as to everything else.

2. The Victorian Preoccupation

To the Victorians, an era as given to change as our own, the consequent anxiety was much more problematic than anticipated, especially as it impacted “civic psychology”. As John Stuart Mill wrote in 1831, “The first of the leading peculiarities of the present age is, that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones.”² Yes, he could have been describing any age since the Stone one, but Mill was describing a contemporary, conventional, evolutionary notion of historical development, one that had been intensified by the recent Enlightenment. That had been another age defined by disruption, one that had triggered its own coping mechanisms to accommodate the widespread changes that were provoked by the revolutions in America, and especially, in France, and which gave rise to the conviction that change certainly must be a good thing as there was so much of it about. The idea that change equated to “Progress” only came later and as a consequence of those Enlightenment convictions; it was first formulated by Condorcet (and given more polish later by August Comte) and it led, after many contentious iterations, to what some called an “ideology of

² J.S. Mill, “The Spirit of the Age”, *Examiner*, 9 January, 1831, pp20-21.

transition”³—itself a phrase that could not even have been uttered before 1796, since “ideology” itself was an Enlightenment invention⁴.

Indeed, Victorians, whose sensibilities are so well represented in the Eleventh, were overwhelmed by the very unsettling idea that their age was an age of anxious transition—not just, as one would assume, from an age of Napoleonic-era warfare, but from an even more distant, foggy, medieval past. It was Thackeray who in 1860 pointed out that he was from an age of horses and coaches and was surprised to find he was living in an age of steam locomotives.⁵

Thus, in the years that passed between the appearance of the Ninth edition of the Britannica and the Eleventh — which saw the first appearance of telephones, sound recordings and motion pictures, automobiles, X-rays, electric lights and airplanes — the permanent ideology of transition gave way to an “ideology of Progress”, a matter of faith as global as Catholic dogmatic theology had been six hundred years before. Although the idea of Progress has only been with us for less than two centuries, it is as fixed in our perceptions as gravity. As the influential Edwardian historian John Bagnell Bury explained,

...the notion of Progress, which now seems so easy to apprehend, is of comparatively recent origin. It has indeed been claimed that various thinkers, both ancient (for instance, Seneca) and medieval (for instance, Friar Bacon), had long ago conceived it. But sporadic observations—such as man's gradual rise from primitive and savage conditions to a certain level of civilisation by a series of inventions, or the possibility of some future additions to his knowledge of nature—which were inevitable at a certain stage of human reflection, do not amount to an anticipation of the idea. The value of such observations was determined, and must be estimated, by the whole context of ideas in which they occurred. It is from its bearings on the future that Progress derives its value, its interest, and its power. You may conceive civilisation as having gradually advanced in the past, but you have not got the idea of Progress until you go on to conceive that it is destined to advance indefinitely in the future. Ideas have their intellectual climates, and I propose to

³ Mary R. Anderson, “Cultural Dissonance and the Ideology of Transition in Late-Victorian England”, *Victorian Periodicals Review* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 108-114

⁴ By Antoine Destut de Tracy in *Elements of Ideology*, vol. 5. As cited by Emmet Kennedy, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Jul-Sep., 1979), pp. 353-368. According to Raymond Williams, the term was given a lasting pejorative connotation by Napoleon Bonaparte, who wrote, “It is to the doctrine of the ideologues – to this diffuse metaphysics, which in a contrived manner seeks to find the primary causes and on this foundation would erect the legislation of peoples, instead of adapting the laws to a knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history – to which one must attribute all the misfortunes which have befallen our beautiful France.” Quoted in Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An introduction* (1991), p. 67. Also quoted in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, new ed. (2015), pp. 110-111,. See also John Gerring, “Ideology: A Definitional Analysis”, *Political Research Quarterly*, Dec., 1997, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Dec., 1997), pp. 957-994.

⁵ William M. Thackeray, “Roundabout Papers”, *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Volume 22 (London: Smith, Elder, 1860), p 62.

show...that the intellectual climates of classical antiquity and the ensuing ages were not propitious to the birth of the doctrine of Progress. It is not till the sixteenth century that the obstacles to its appearance definitely begin to be transcended and a favourable atmosphere to be gradually prepared.⁶

So the Victorian and Edwardian fascination with Progress was predicated on continuing improvements in those things which could be measured — this faster, bigger, more powerful than that — and not at all on some cyclic Platonic-Aristotelian process leading to an uncomplicated, non-linear teleology or on any of the complex causative, political, sociological, philosophical, economic theories of Progress that were disruptive to the narrative arc familiar to Chisholm, one useful in framing descriptions and accounts of daily life. In an age of Utilitarian practicality, Progress came to resemble what we see today: a more-or-less linear sequence of events that were measurable, comparable and built on one another. One thing led inevitably to the next. It created a kind of indisputable trajectory that predicted a desirable end. Disruptions were footnoted and dismissed. Influential views, such as Bury's "scientific" approach, were attentive most of all to an explanation not only of what was happening in the world, but also why. In other words, Progress was a foundational concept extremely congenial to the practice of journalism.

But, as careful readers must have noted, the Eleventh's welding of Progress to the metrics of materiality meant it was impossible to use the Eleventh to understand the progress of love or the slow defeat of hatred. This narrowing of the possibility of Progress is now the mark of postmodern rationality; during a 2000 interview, Peter Gumpel, SJ, a Vatican relator and expert in canonization, explained to me that only well-documented medical miracles merit the expensive process of investigation because the scientific evidence is clear. So cats may rain down from heaven, but lacking the required paperwork, to the Roman Catholic church it is not officially a miracle. (The last non-medical miracle to be investigated was in 1948 when "a small pot of rice prepared in a church kitchen in Spain...proved sufficient to feed nearly 200 hungry people, after the cook prayed to a local saint."⁷) Eliminating a meaningful definition of all immeasurable things from considerations of what constitutes Progress is to map a very small planet. Nevertheless, Progress was the story Hooper and his editor, Chisholm, had to sell.

⁶ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 6.

⁷ Tom Gjelten, "Parallels" NPR; <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/08/31/491937448/how-the-catholic-church-documented-mother-teresas-two-miracles>. Retrieved 2 June 2020. The article says it happened in 1949, but Gumpel told me the heavily documented event took place in 1948.

3. The Contagion of Anxiety.

“An ideology of transition, which can encompass hope and uncertainty equally, is perhaps most powerful in resolving cultural dissonance,” wrote Mary Anderson. “To evolve an ideology of transition implies, above all, a sense of perspective—the ability of a society to situate itself in time and space in reference to its own past and to other societies.”⁸ Easier said than done, given the near impossibility of forming a societal agreement on anything, and so, often, this cure for anxiety involves creating tenuous if comforting ties to an unrelated past.

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past...The historic past into which the new tradition is inserted need not be lengthy, stretching back into the assumed mists of time. Revolutions and 'progressive movements' which break with the past, by definition, have their own relevant past, though it may be cut off at a certain date, such as 1789. However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.⁹

This is, of course, to describe a manipulation of narrative, a way of soothing the growing anxieties induced by rapidly increasing change.

Society is always on the brink of an anxiety meltdown. As an affliction, anxiety is a kind of mental Covid; it's highly contagious, usually nearby, and invisible. The source of that anxiety is an inability to predict future events and especially their consequences. Everyone worries and people love discussing their anxieties, as though sharing them might lessen their impact. As Scott Stossel, an editor at *The Atlantic*, an American periodical, wrote in describing his own

⁸ Anderson, p. 108.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions,” *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), p 1-2.

psychological problems, “Anxiety and its associated disorders represent the most common form of officially classified mental illness in the United States today, more common even than depression and other mood disorders.”¹⁰ The NHS reports that one in ten Britons take medication to control their anxiety disorders. As Stossel reports, it’s worse in America:

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, some 40 million American adults, about one in six, are suffering from some kind of anxiety disorder at any given time; based on the most recent data from the [U.S.] Department of Health and Human Services, their treatment accounts for more than a quarter of all spending on mental-health care. Recent epidemiological data suggest that one in four of us can expect to be stricken by debilitating anxiety at some point in our lifetime. And it is debilitating: studies have compared the psychic and physical impairment tied to living with an anxiety disorder with the impairment tied to living with diabetes—both conditions are usually manageable, sometimes fatal, and always a pain to deal with. In 2012, Americans filled nearly 50 million prescriptions for just one antianxiety drug: alprazolam, the generic name for Xanax.

Yet, while diagnoses such as phobia (Greek: *phobos*, fear), humours, melancholia, bile and so forth have been familiar to medicine since Hippocrates,¹¹ “anxiety, like schizophrenia, was hardly known as an illness before the nineteenth century.”¹² Blame it on Progress:

At least one historian has noted that the first significant signs of clinical anxiety coincided with the “age of progress,”... a time when many of the old dangers that had threatened humanity for centuries—starvation, epidemic disease, and high rates of infant mortality—began to abate in severity, leaving people to fret about less immediate worries.... In other words, the healthier people became, the more they worried about their personal health.¹³

More Progress equates to more transition and, therefore, to more anxiety.

4. Authority and Journalism.

The anxiety associated with Progress can be alleviated by consensus agreements on sources of authority, providing a shortcut through polemic and division about what constitutes

¹⁰ Scott Stossel, “Surviving Anxiety”, *The Atlantic*, January-February 2014.

¹¹ Gerrit Glas, “A Conceptual History of Anxiety and Depression” in *Depression and Anxiety* (Second Edition), Siegfried Kasper et al., eds. (New York-Basel: Dekker, 2003), p. 3

¹² Marc-Antoine Crocq, “A history of anxiety: from Hippocrates to DSM”, *Dialogues Clin Neurosci.* 2015;17:319-325.

¹³ Theodore Zeldin, *France, 1848–1945: Anxiety and hypocrisy*. (New York: Oxford University Press; 1981), p 59 ff.

Progress and where it leads. In 1900, *The Times*, the “Thunderer”, was a business that had been built on authority, and is, perhaps the only reason it still exists. Hooper’s relationship with *The Times* may have started in 1896 as a straightforward advertising-and-direct-mail play, but when what was perceived as the most authoritative English-language newspaper was joined to what was heavily promoted as the most authoritative English-language reference work, the claim they both had on credibility was made stronger and benefitted both in unexpected ways.

When the partnership was formed, neither *The Times* nor the *Britannica* had a financial history that predicted success. Since its founding by three Scottish businessmen in 1768, no owner of the *Britannica* had ever earned much of a profit on the enterprise. However, through a series of hopeful owners following a flimsy forward-leaning subscription model, which leveraged the sales of one volume against the next, the encyclopedia grew in size, scope and stature; the first three-volume edition had been written entirely by the editor and published and sold in parts; binding was a separate, optional purchase. By the time Hooper purchased it from the owners, A&C Black of Edinburgh, the encyclopedia had reached nine editions; it had been pirated around the world, A&C Black were certain the market was exhausted, and there was no prospect of a tenth edition. The encyclopedia had authority, but no obvious way to monetize it.

Similarly, *The Times* had simply proceeded from its founding in 1785 with a kind of blindness borne of an unquestioned belief in its authority, which the proprietors assumed magically conveyed financial permanence. Hooper saw *The Times* as a perfect partner and his timing couldn’t have been better. He approached C.F. Moberly Bell, who had been newly appointed as assistant manager, following the unexpected elevation of the inexperienced Arthur Walter to the position of chief proprietor following the death of his older brother in a swimming accident. As Moberly Bell discovered, *The Times* was a paper palace: the newspaper’s finances were rudely documented on scraps of invoices and notes about handshakes. The whole enterprise was built on a fractured proprietorship that was as frail as it was complex. It was, Moberly Bell sensibly believed, on the brink of collapse.¹⁴

¹⁴ E. Moberley Bell, *The Life & Letters of C.F. Moberley Bell*, by His Daughter E.H.C. Moberley Bell. (London: Richards Press, 1927), p133.

Chisholm and Hooper understood that any ambiguity attached to Progress was a problem for the *Britannica*, the whole point of which was to eliminate ambiguity in all things by the artful assertion of authority. Moberly Bell also needed to solve the problem since a newspaper purporting to be a paper of record had to function well above and beyond ambiguity. The thing of beauty for both *The Times* and the *Britannica* was authority, a delicate thing and the instrument by which clarity and stability could be advanced. The future of both publications depended on authority; they both monetized it and they both assiduously defended it. Something as buoyant as authority could not be tethered to the heavy burdens of anxiety and ambiguity. Creating a plausible, resilient set of assumptions that embraced and explained a certain, reassuring kind of Progress was the ongoing work of both the encyclopedia and the newspaper.

Hooper's American successes had been built on using direct-marketing principles and easy credit terms. His associate, a flamboyant Hearst journalist named Henry Haxton, was a master of the salesman's art. Hooper and Haxton used the marketing technique they had very successfully employed in America. It combined a ticking-clock narrative explaining that a substantial saving could be gained by placing an immediate order rather than waiting another moment and leavened it with a thick slice of hyperbole — “all the wisdom in the world”, “the sum of all human knowledge”, “everything explained that is explainable” and so on. It was a noisy and persistent claim of authority meant to appeal to the practical Edwardian appetite for self-improvement.

The newspaper's authoritative public profile, recently disfigured (and severely impoverished) by the credibility-scarring Pigott affair, in which the political convictions of the *Times*'s chief proprietor led him to accept, and publish, falsified evidence purchased from a Dublin journalist, Richard Pigott, that promised to be politically fatal to *The Times*'s enemies, and ultimately to Gladstone's government, was shrouded in self-serving, institutional reticence.¹⁵ It had cost the paper dearly and by the time Moberly Bell met Hooper, finances once again looked grim. That *The Times* would not be a permanent fixture of British life was unthinkable. It was, and through three proprietors had been the authoritative paper of record for the English-

¹⁵ F. S. L. Lyons, “Parnellism and Crime, 1887-90”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 24 (London: 1974), pp. 123-140.

speaking world. Its preeminence was unquestioned. On meeting William Howard Russell, the paper's Washington correspondent, in 1861, Abraham Lincoln said "I am very glad to make your acquaintance, and to see you in this country. The London *Times* is one of the greatest powers in the world, – in fact, I don't know anything which has much more power, – except perhaps the Mississippi."¹⁶ But the Mississippi didn't have to pay its own way, and by bringing Moberly Bell a partnership that insured a constant stream of revenue to the paper with little risk, so long as the credibility of the paper wasn't soiled—a problem Hooper and Bell solved by putting the encyclopedia under Moberly Bell's editorial supervision—money was less a concern than it had been. Stanley Morison, the unofficial historian of *The Times*, was later able to claim that thanks to the *Britannica*, the fortunes of *The Times* were being reversed. Even before the Eleventh appeared, the Tenth edition (the 1903 repackaging of the Ninth edition), according to Morison, was the buoy the paper needed:

"The revenue for 1903-1904, it has been seen, was £200,000. The continuous tendency to fall in previous years was at the rate of £9,000 a year. The revenue for 1904-1905 might, therefore, reasonably have been expected to fall to £191,000. Equally, but for the Hooper and Jackson agreement, the revenue for 1905-1906 might reasonably have been expected to fall another £9,000 to £182,000. Actually the revenue for 1905-1906 was £295,539 19s 3d. Similarly, without the Hooper and Jackson agreement, the revenue of *The Times* for 1906-1907 might reasonably have been expected to fall to £173,000; but actually it was £285,258 5s 3d. The figures prove not only that the Hooper and Jackson agreement covering the forthcoming new tenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* was a valuable asset but that the new advertising and circulation schemes by which *The Times* and Hooper and Jackson provided against the cessation of profits on the old ninth edition were justified."¹⁷

If Hooper was to be successful with the Eleventh and its mission of proselytizing for Progress, he needed to incorporate undeniable authority from the most obvious source, and it found it in its

¹⁶ William H. Russell, *My Diary North and South* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1863), pp 37-39 (entry for 27 March 1861).

¹⁷ Stanley Morison et al., p. 447.

relationship with *The Times*. That perfectly symbiotic relationship lasted until a legal squabble between Hooper and Jackson became public and cast a shadow that touched *The Times*, at which point Northcliffe, who had purchased the paper from the hapless Walter family, quickly cut the ties between the two publications. (Undaunted, Hooper and Chisholm courted both Oxford and Cambridge — equals, they felt, in authority to *The Times*. Oxford demurred; Cambridge didn't.)

Although the Eleventh was once the most famous English-language encyclopedia in history, that title may now belong to Wikipedia. That online aggregation of information written and edited by Everyperson on earth is, in important ways, the opposite of the Eleventh, which leveraged the value of *authority*. Wikipedia uses something we might define as credentialed expertise; it had been an essential part of Chisholm's very deliberate editorial design, although by no means an innovation. The Ninth — and indeed every edition of the EB — relied on the academic or professional celebrity of contributors to attract readers. The Ninth's "collection of detached monographs" was by recognized experts: famous dentists wrote about teeth and famous footballers wrote about football. This helped answer the unasked question on most readers' minds, the question that went directly to authority: Says who? Until the Eleventh, all encyclopedias had been similar to the anthologies of monographs; they were about anything which meant they could not be about anything in particular. It required the new editorial focus Chisholm provided to unify the entire work by applying journalistic principles to a common set of underlying assumptions generally shared by those who might be considered members of what might be (and at the time were) members of the contributor-class. Expert credibility harnessed to a Chisholm's editorial template produced a successful formula for the Eleventh. Modern service journalism is built on this model, of course.

Wikipedia, where anyone with a keyboard and an internet connection can be a contributor and/or an editor, uses an oddly inverted model for this. Reflecting the mood of the times, Wikipedia's resident expert is the crowd. Readers can read an entry about, say, Russia or relativity, and not question its authority because it's been edited by a million people; the most obscure topic becomes a record of what everyone knows. In logic, this is a fallacy, *argumentum ad populum*, and it's what Wikipedia uses as an editorial instrument. Consequently, Wikipedia is used to buttress arguments in a way the Eleventh could not have countenanced nor provided.

Conceptually, Chisholm's book about Progress was only nominally an encyclopedia at all. It's also a monument to upper-middle-class British Victorian cultural supremacy and to an enduring Anglophilia, one that was also eagerly embraced by millions of aspiring readers in the Anglosphere, and especially Americans. It's an atlas of optimism, a massive 29-volume work and browsing it can be as exhilarating today as it must have been nearly a century ago. Modern readers, in the words of Kenneth Clark, can leap "from one subject to another, fascinated as much by the play of mind and the idiosyncrasies of their authors as by the facts and dates."¹⁸ Part of the pleasure in opening the Eleventh is discovering the obvious biases and peccadilloes of its august contributors whose entries are sometimes upholstered with speculation, sensationalism and contention, but always contained by Chisholm's editorial plan. Moreover, the Eleventh is scented with a melancholic irony obvious only to modern readers: It is after all a snapshot of the civilized world just as it was dressing to go for a fatal stroll into the abyss of World War I and all the terrors the twentieth century had in store.

Authority is the dark matter making the whole thing cohere. As polarization rises, so does the contest for authority, to play the part of disinterested arbiter. This is less a problem in Britain's partisan press than it is in the US where the myth of objectivity still holds sway. As a consequence modern newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, guard their claim to authority with increasing difficulty, especially since it must be made on a foundation of undisputed fairness, if not ostensible objectivity. *The New York Times* sought to enhance its authority by appointing a "public editor"—a sort of fact-checker deluxe who would respond to reader concerns about fairness and partisanship by reviewing content and pronouncing from a referee's chair on its high quality. A string of experienced journalists filled this role, including one with whom I had a personal acquaintanceship. Each one reported, with varying degrees of nuanced caution, pervasive bias in the newspaper's coverage. Finally, the newspaper abolished the position, and to keep its message unsoiled also stopped the practice of allowing reader comments to appear on news pages. The work of validating readers' assumptions requires constant monitoring by a diligent curatorial mind, keeping conflicting points of view far from the paper and ensuring the kind of clear, reassuring expressions of

¹⁸ Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood: A Self Portrait* (London: John Murray, 1975), p. 68.

authority the proprietor feels best responds to the desires of consumers. In the last year alone, two senior members of the editorial staff have left the newspaper, after making public protests, in response to the paper's narrow restrictions on expressed opinion, not to mention news coverage. *The New York Times* skews leftward in its coverage, and although observers on the right viewed blocking dissenting views as a "gotcha" moment, it should be seen instead as a well-reasoned effort to avoid complicating the function of journalism in validating the assumptions of readers, who, after all, pay the bills.

As the Eleventh demonstrates, and as the example of *The New York Times* illustrates, an editor is not a curator. An editor gives shape and coherence to an idea and disallows anything that induces ambiguity. *Britannicas* Ninth and before were curatorial projects. By describing the inevitability of material Progress, the Eleventh contained a highly marketable, extremely authoritative, very popular vision of the future, one with important implications for readers. It was a journalistic editorial triumph.

5. The Polemics of Progress.

Bury's understanding of Progress ("You may conceive civilisation as having gradually advanced in the past, but you have not got the idea of Progress until you go on to conceive that it is destined to advance indefinitely in the future") is true of course, but only up to a point. It begs a hugely important, extremely volatile question, one that animates public discussion today: To "advance indefinitely" *where*, exactly? To the left? Or to the right? Straight on? Reverse? The question slows all Progress, since the road to agreement forks here and comes to a halt until it's resolved by debate, election or conflict. There can be no Progress without a foundational consensus. Failing that, Progress ceases to be a process and instead becomes a disputed destination.

Change is indeed always everywhere and we are all constantly on the move, but where we are going is anybody's guess. History offers no trustworthy arbiter, since our brightest are often made dim by the passage of time: It should be remembered less than two centuries have passed since to most educated Britons and Americans, the colonization of Africa meant Progress, and before the American Civil War, proslavery sentiment in service to an asserted Progress was not uncommon in the United States or Britain. Darwin is the

pope of Progress, but his contribution to racism is still widely discussed (and indeed is amplified by the Eleventh's entry on "Negro"). And for many years, Eugenics was seen as a handmaiden to Progress.

As it affects journalism, this kind of unsettled cultural and political understanding greatly intensifies social polarity. Everyone claims to be on the side of Progress, that unexamined virtue, but sooner or later we discover that many (sometimes most) are not.

In the present era of change, anxiety is felt everywhere. It is produced by change, as discussed above, and intensified by uncertainty concerning direction. These anxieties are especially pronounced in journalism, where, even superficially, change is a medley of bad news. Newspapers and radio stations are disappearing rapidly as websites multiply. Perhaps journalism, as it's been traditionally understood, is a dead profession, like being a professional shepherd or a cooper. The cause of this is simple enough: Nobody needs "news" packaged in a daily publication. The events of the day have been atomized. News is dust. It's everywhere and what happens during breakfast is modified or eclipsed by what happens during lunch. We are eyewitnesses to the events we choose to witness. If a bus plunges off the road in Paraguay, that information will be around the world — often in photographs or videos of the 43 passengers on board — before the bus hits the bottom, figuratively speaking of course.

The significance of these events, articulated as context, matters as much as the events themselves, sometimes more. The improvisational taxonomies provided by context makes the new model for modern journalism possible — and contentious. Events themselves are unimportant.

6. Progress and the Function of Journalism.

In his "editorial introduction" to the Eleventh, Chisholm wrote, "In the sciences of Nature people have begun to expect a constant progress which will enable most of the problems that now perplex us to be ultimately solved...mainly due to the constant acquisition of new facts..."

To Chisholm, progress was like gravity. There was no escaping it. And he then provides an example of exactly the kind of progress he means:

“Seventy years ago, in the days of Lachmann, scholars differed more widely than they do today as to the origin of the Homeric poems. Forty years ago the tendency of critics was to place the appearance of the Gospels in their present form at a date considerably later than that which the general consensus of learned men would now assign to them. So there is less discrepancy today than in the generation before last as to the characters of Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Jefferson, and so the time may come when even the controversies that have raged round Mary Queen of Scots will have been set at rest.”

Because we’ve made a lot of progress since 1910, today the first response to this must be, “Forget Mary Queen of Scots. Who the hell is Lachmann?” because now Karl Lachmann is unknown and totally irrelevant to most of us. We no longer know, or care, about his theories of Homeric origins. We barely know or care about Homer. And as for “even the controversies that have raged round Mary Queen of Scots,” those have been laid to rest quietly with a shrug — and without elucidation.

You can imagine sitting opposite Chisholm and nodding optimistically while he enthusiastically goes on about a time in the future — say, for example, today — when “constant progress which will enable most of the problems that now perplex us to be ultimately solved.” Well, here we are, surrounded by disillusion, disappointed in having finally reached our destination. “How do you like it here?” a young man asked me one day in Durres, Albania, as I stepped off the boat from Bari after a stormy, violent passage. Then, not wanting to look naïve and without missing a beat, he replied for me: “Not so good, huh?”

Part of the confusion comes from the assumption, visible in Chisholm’s “constant progress”, that said progress involves connecting A to B as part of a straight-line proposition. But Progress is never quite as simple as it seems and going from A to what you hope is B may in fact deliver you to Z, to one of the most backward places on earth. Just look at that North Korean missile program! Talk about progress! So in revisiting what Chisholm had to say about Progress a century ago, we can admit we *still* don’t know the origin of the Homeric poems. And as for “the appearance of the Gospels in their present form at a date considerably later than that which the general consensus of learned men would now assign to them” all most learned people can say is, “Huh?” So maybe all progress is not good. Or maybe progress of one kind isn’t progress of another. For sure, the rising tide of Progress not only doesn’t lift all boats, it may leave some high and dry and rotting on their keels. Or it may not be Progress at all.

It’s definitely not a tide. In fact, I think Progress as a big, wide, boat-lifting thing is a fantastic myth, more swamp than sea. Progress doesn’t lift anything. It just makes a mess. Is it

possible, perhaps desirable, to create a running ledger of contexts in which Progress is being made or lost? One hopes so, because without it, all swamps resemble seas. Globally, the question of the day every day is, “How are we doing?” Without a way of charting the progress of Progress — certainly one of journalism’s most important remits — it becomes a zero-sum game, which is the resilient tool of stasis — and therefore the nemesis of Progress.

This can be deceptive, because sometimes, the result of great apparent Progress is deep, deadly and entrenched regression. This phenomenon is called a “Progress Trap.” The term has been ascribed to Ronald Wright, the author of *A Short History of Progress*.¹⁹ His example, paraphrased: A caveman needs to kill a mammoth to eat. Two cavemen, working together, learn how to kill a mammoth more efficiently. That’s progress. Then they learn how to kill two mammoths at a time. (Double progress and affluence.) *Then* they learn how to stampede *all* the mammoths over a cliff, killing them all at once. It looked like the pinnacle of progress, until, oh no, no more mammoths. Suddenly our proto-geniuses are all hunting radishes and nuts and reminiscing about the good old days and all those mammoth chops.

If we have reliable information, we might know better, since we are prone periodically to kill off all our mammoths. The Eleventh edition of the *Britannica* was followed, after only eleven years and a World War, with a Twelfth edition. That “supplement” edition (the Eleventh plus three supplemental volumes) was devoted to all the Progress that had been made in the war. It contained page after page of charts and diagrams and explanation of all the forward thinking the war had provoked in cannons, rockets, tanks and rifles as it sliced, to use Hugh Chisholm’s postwar words, a “Grand-Canyon gash in the whole intellectual structure of the world”. Into the gash went all the cultural mammoths of our civilization—we had a war to win and progress was contingent on warfare. The likes of Lachmann had no place in the Twelfth edition. In fact, by the time the smoke had cleared, Chisholm confessed it was impossible “to recreate the whole drama of the far-reaching past” since “the type of mind and will” that created the Eleventh edition had, by the time of the Twelfth, “largely ceased to function along the pre-war ways”. In other words, we were busy with improving the range and accuracy of artillery and simply forgot the rest.

This compression of Progress by means of war-induced ellipsis has a remarkable effect and many people have pointed out the obvious suicidal effects of World War One on humankind.

¹⁹ Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2019), p.8

Wright points out that human beings who resemble you and me have been around for 50,000 years, but “civilization”, the fruit of all that Neolithic progress of ours, has been around for only 5,000 years or so. Yet, those who came before weren’t knuckle-dragging semi-humans. They were people very much like us,²⁰ getting up every day, going to work and trying to get ahead. For 45,000 years (and, recent reports suggest, probably even much longer), ninety percent of our time was spent trying to get to a point where we could *begin* to make actual progress. What we have to show for that 45,000-year apprenticeship is the ability to rub two sticks together.

But is that all? No. It’s just that that—and little else—is all the information we needed to push forward into our five thousand years of civilized existence. Or so it would seem. But Progress actually involves much more than mastering a rudimentary, two-stick trick, so for 45,000 years we made huge progress in learning how to live together, how to pet a dog, how to watch the stars, how to fall in love, how to live as humans. We did it all spreading information by word of mouth, because journalism as we know it is barely 400 years old.²¹ If we hadn’t made progress in these measureless ways, we’d have never survived to build enough A-bombs to kill everybody alive. Technical, scientific progress is a thin slice of what we’re doing in the way of making Progress. It obscures all other, often competing kinds of progress; it’s literally all we can see — the little numbers that say “farther”, “faster”, “wider”, “bigger”, but not “better”. These are all ways of measuring Progress in a way that makes sense to us.

Progress has an army of defenders, many wearing the service stripes of celebrated media performers. There are very many on TV or radio at this moment someplace. The BBC’s Andrew Marr recently corralled three Progress-promoters into a studio. The discussion was supposed to provide a pro-and-con view of Progress. But of course they all agreed with each other on Progress by nearly avoiding the topic completely.²² The leader of the small pack, Stephen Pinker, was doing publicity in support of his latest book, *Enlightenment Now*²³; his co-panelists had similar books of their own.

²⁰ Colin Barras, “Ancient humans: What we know and still don’t know about them”, *New Scientist*, 3 May 2017.

²¹ Podszun, R. “Searching the Future of Newspapers: With a Little Help from Google and IP law” *IIC* 44, 259–262 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40319-013-0037-2>

²² BBC Radio 4, “Fascism and the Enlightenment”, 18 February 2018.

²³ Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now* (London: Penguin, 2019), 576pp

The discussion did provide the answer to the obvious question: who could be *opposed* to progress? Answer: Mussolini and Donald Trump. And you can imagine the marshmallow war that followed, because as soon as an idea becomes an ideology, all complex thought is lost. Besides, for Pinker and the others, Progress is all about “recent scientific studies” (Pinker even cites UN reports!) that seem miraculously to validate claims for an increase in happiness, despite a 2015 CDC report²⁴ showing that over the previous 15 years, the total suicide rate has increased 24% from 10.5 to 13.0 per 100,000. The Pandemic has driven that even higher. That’s a kind of progress, maybe. Pinker’s book is filled with optimistic charts and graphs. If there is a Progress Trap, it’ll probably be something based on numbers. That’s probably why scientists live on the edge of a trap. Their motto: the more Progress you have, the more you want. *Anything* that crosses the mind of a mad scientist can get government funding and a big, green light. Demonstrate the ability to clone a sheep and eventually, as these things go, you’ll soon clone 100 humans and start a whole new experiment. On Mars. We should be able to make a bomb that vaporizes the planet, so let’s get ‘er done. But mind your step, because the Pandemic and the social-justice wars of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century may already have done to what we shorthandedly call “the culture” what World War One did to Europe.

The traditional core business of journalism, its function — gathering general information about events and whatnot and relaying it to a wide audience — is impossible to sustain. As discussed above, the barrier to entry is very low and the supply of product is overabundant. The differentiating factor is *context*, and there we find the crux of the problem: fewer and fewer people trust businesses devoted to traditional journalism. This especially applies to discerning what constitutes Progress.

In 2020, the Gallup Organization and the Knight Foundation published the most recent survey in their ongoing “Trust, Media and Democracy” research. In a poll of 20,000 American adults, the survey found “[T]here is a widening gulf between American aspirations for and assessments of the news media.... Many Americans feel the media’s critical role of informing and holding those in power accountable is compromised by increasing bias. As such, Americans

²⁴ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>

have not only lost confidence in the ideal of an objective media, they believe news organizations actively support the partisan divide.”²⁵

A nearly concurrent YouGov global survey of 80,000 adults found a similar result:

In our January [2020] poll across countries, less than four in ten (38%) said they trust most news most of the time – a fall of four percentage points from 2019. Less than half (46%) said they trust the news they use themselves. Political polarisation linked to rising uncertainty seems to have undermined trust in public broadcasters in particular, which are losing support from political partisans from both the right and the left.²⁶

The conventional view might suggest that the increasing bias in news media widely perceived by the public represents a decline of journalism. But perhaps these polls show how well journalism is performing its new function, not one dedicated to gathering and distributing objective accounts of quotidian events, but in performing a new, more profitable function: producing context that *validates the assumptions* of majorities of consumers about which direction Progress should take. Small wonder if the media “actively support the partisan divide”. That’s not exactly bad. It’s just where the money is.

Accuracy in journalism is not a feasible commercial product. However, a business can be built around elevating anxiety then selling reassurance; consumers don’t really want information that suggests they may be wrong about some of their closely-held assumptions. The function of journalism, as a commercial enterprise, is to provide comfort ahead of information.

I spent a couple of decades working as a senior editor of several prominent American magazines. Until very recently, magazine editors were being told that to be successful, they had to appeal to a community of readers with a shared interest; moreover, the editorial “voice” of the magazine was meant to be unobtrusive when it wasn’t being condescending. These notions are still believed by some. Of course, the multiplicity of publications in categories should have been enough to prove those notions to be false. As we are learning now, the secret to publishing success is found in appealing to a community of shared *assumptions*, and by speaking to them as peers—the most august newspapers now post stories under headlines that mimic the informal, just-now voice of the blogosphere. Vehemence, sarcasm and snarks are common, often resulting

²⁵ John S. and James L. Knight Foundation/Gallup, “American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy”, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2020-trust-media-and-democracy/>, February 2020.

²⁶ Newman et al., YouGov/Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020”, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

in much-desired virality. Few things create stronger bonds of loyalty than shared belief, especially during times of disruption and anxiety.

Journalism is now a business exploiting division both in the selection and analysis of events. People will pay to have their views reinforced, but they are less likely to pay for “news” since, as discussed, it’s freely available from many, many sources. Approximately half of any potential Anglophone market will have a view of Progress predicated not just on opinion, but on *belief*. That means that not only are those on one side wrong, they’re *evil*. And evil must be defeated, suppressed, killed. Intelligent people are understandably worried about the potential of this kind of conceptualization. It’s conducive to conflict. It’s a Progress Trap.

We’ve returned to a state of neo-Victorian, positivist anxiety, avoiding thoughts of where our new century’s transitions might leave us in a hundred years. We may be no more certain than Mill was two centuries ago about where we are going, but that’s irrelevant: the ideology of Progress is a worldview built on narrative arcs that permit little interruption and require constant unquestioned movement, direction be damned. The Eleventh reflected this view without intimating even a slight doubt about the consequences. Modern journalism continues that tradition.

Today, the Eleventh shines, still. It’s a fount of nostalgia for eggheads, the definitive survey of a middle-earth of Edwardian tranquility, filled with magic squares and Invincible engines, the serious, well-dressed Swedes of the Philanthropic Exegetic Society and an agreeable belief in Progress and where it might take us. Meanwhile, only four editions later, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is stuck forever in a state of recursive, digital revision, competing unsuccessfully against Wikipedia, the very antithesis of the Eleventh (on which it is ironically built), but perfect for our own transitional period in which, according to the Department of Education, the vast majority of U.S. public schools are failing in their mission just as their British counterparts are failing less dramatically in theirs. Even the most visionary of Edwardians would never have ventured to guess that a deeply held belief in the ideology of Progress would lead almost immediately to the first 24 hours of the Battle of the Somme, and then to all this.

This new function for journalism predicts a business model with obvious risks. Both studies show conventional political biases produce a view of the press consistent with the present nature

of media, which now leans towards the left and away from the right.²⁷ Hence, there is a bit more satisfaction on the left with journalism and less on the right, demonstrating perhaps that media validates left-leaning assumptions better than the assumptions of those on the right. That doesn't of course mean either cohort is better informed. It does mean that with a market more or less evenly split, validating the assumptions of half the market means alienating the other half. That's an unusual business model, one that leaves a larger number of journalistic enterprises delivering a very similar product to half the potential market. The competition for reading time is already fierce, and there are only 24 hours in a day. Eventually, products responding to the desires of the underserved cohort of consumers will emerge, widening choice but heightening polarization.

And that won't solve the problem. The large surveys discussed here both show overwhelming and universal support for a model that provides a very carefully balanced reporting of events and accompanying analysis. The probability of realizing such a solution is laughably small, even though a continuing pursuit of a "win" for either side is likely to lead to a media Progress Trap. Besides, objectivity is an impossibility. But an overt, artful and demonstrable effort at providing *competing* views of Progress as "news" might be an interesting if somewhat eccentric model for journalism's entrepreneurs of the future, if there is one.

²⁷ Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyon, "A Measure of Media Bias", Department of Statistics, Columbia University. http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~gelman/stuff_for_blog/Media.Bias.pdf. This perception of a left-leaning press is less pointed in the UK, where the ideological persuasions of most newspapers are made clear and, indeed, serve to better target marketing efforts. In British broadcasting, however, this problem is handled by a government agency — Ofcom — which seeks to regulate fairness. Not surprisingly, it, too, is often subject to complaints.